

Rules of the Game

Ranged Attacks (Part Four)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we examined [projectile weapons](#). This week, we'll wrap up our look at ranged combat by considering [cover](#), shooting into melee, and other topics related to ranged attacks.

Cover

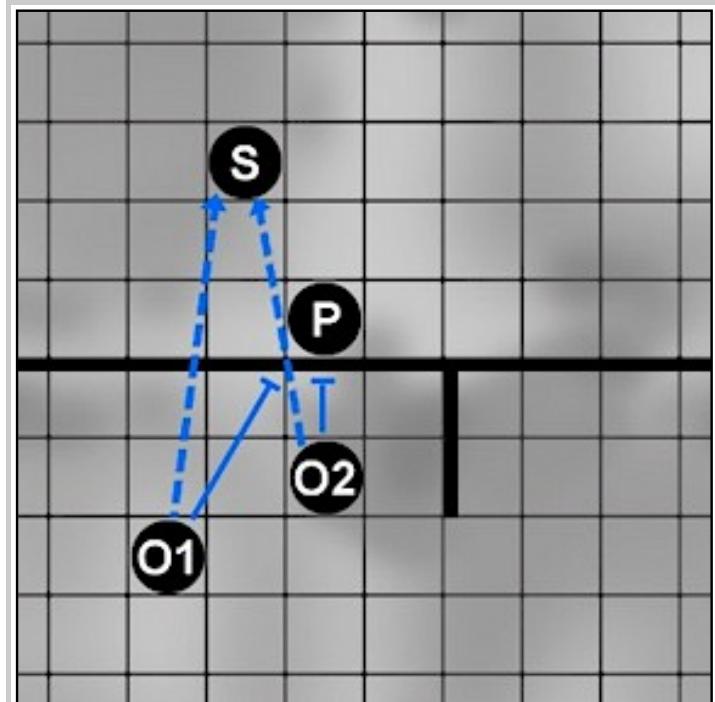
You can gain cover from anything that can block a ranged attack, such as a low wall, the corner of a building, a bush, or even another character.

Sometimes something that provides cover seems to fill a whole [square](#) (or side of a square), but really doesn't. Such things might include low walls that cover a target's lower half only, creatures (which tend to move around within their squares), or a bush (which might have plenty of gaps that could allow a projectile to pass through). In these cases, the barrier provides cover that a projectile must pass through to reach the target.

Low barriers (those that cover only the lower half of the target) provide cover only when the target is within 30 feet of the low barrier and the attacker is not closer to the barrier than the defender; see page 151 in the *Player's Handbook* and the diagram provided here.

When a solid barrier can cover a target's full height, it blocks all ranged attacks unless it blocks only part of the target. To determine if the target has cover in a case of partial blocking, trace lines from any corner of the attacker's space to all corner of the defender's space. If at least one of these lines intersects the barrier, but not all of them do, the target has cover against the attack and gains a +4 [bonus to Armor Class](#).

If the target occupies more than one space, the target gets the benefit of cover against a ranged attack if any square it occupies is protected by cover, even if some squares it occupies aren't. This helps offset the defender's size penalty to Armor Class and it reflects some of the inherent difficulties a ranged attacker faces.



Two orcs (O1 and O2) face a pixie (P) and a satyr (S) across a stone wall about 3 feet high. The wall is tall enough to cover the pixie from head to toe, blocking all ranged attacks from the orcs.

The low wall gives the satyr cover against ranged attacks from the orc 1 on the left. Orc 2 on the right, however, is closer to the low wall than the satyr, and the satyr gains no cover from the wall against that orc's ranged attacks.

From pages 150-152 of the *Player's Handbook*:

COVER

One of the best defenses available is cover. By taking cover behind a tree, a wall, the side of a wagon, or the battlements of a castle, you can protect yourself from attacks, especially ranged attacks, and also from being spotted. To determine whether your target has cover from your ranged attack, choose a corner of your square. If any line from this corner to any corner of the target's square passes through a square or border that blocks line of effect or provides cover, or through a square occupied by a creature, the target has cover (+4 to AC).

When making a melee attack against an adjacent target, your target has cover if any line from your square to the target's square goes through a wall (including a low wall). When making a melee attack against a target that isn't adjacent to you (such as with a reach weapon), use the rules for determining cover from ranged attacks.

Low Obstacles and Cover: A low obstacle (such as a wall no higher than half your height) provides cover, but only to creatures within 30 feet (6 squares) of it. The attacker can ignore the cover if he's closer to the obstacle than his target.

Cover and Attacks of Opportunity: You can't execute an attack of opportunity against an opponent with cover relative to you.

Cover and Reflex Saves: Cover grants you a +2 bonus on Reflex saves against attacks that originate or burst out from a point on the other side of the cover from you, such as a red dragon's breath weapon or a *lightning bolt*. Note that spread effects (see page 175), such as a *fireball*, can extend around corners and thus negate this cover bonus.

Cover and Hide Checks: You can use cover to make a Hide check. Without cover, you usually need concealment (see below) to make a Hide check.

Soft Cover: Creatures, even your enemies, can provide you with cover against melee attacks, giving you a +4 bonus to AC. However, such soft cover provides no bonus on Reflex saves, nor does soft cover allow you to make a Hide check.

Big Creatures and Cover: Any creature with a space larger than 5 feet (1 square) determines cover against melee attacks slightly differently than smaller creatures do. Such a creature can choose any square that it occupies to determine if an opponent has cover against its melee attacks. Similarly, when making a melee attack against such a creature, you can pick any of the squares it occupies to determine if it has cover against you.

Total Cover: If you don't have line of effect to your target (for instance, if he is completely behind a high wall), he is considered to have total cover from you. You can't make an attack against a target that has total cover.

Varying Degrees of Cover: In some cases, cover may provide a greater bonus to AC and Reflex saves. For instance, a character peering around a corner or through an arrow slit has even better cover than a character standing behind a low wall or an obstacle. In such situations, the DM can double the normal cover bonuses to AC and Reflex saves (to +8 and +4, respectively). A creature with this improved cover effectively gains improved evasion against any attack to which the Reflex save bonus applies (see the improved evasion ability in the rogue class description, page 51). Furthermore, improved cover provides

a +10 bonus on Hide checks.

The DM may impose other penalties or restrictions to attacks depending on the details of the cover. For example, to strike effectively through a narrow opening, you need to use a long piercing weapon, such as an arrow or a spear. A battleaxe or a pick just isn't going to get through an arrow slit.

Shooting Into a Melee

Firing into a melee is a difficult proposition because melee combatants do a great deal of bobbing and weaving. When you shoot into a melee, you take a -4 **penalty** on your **attack roll** because you must be very careful where you shoot to avoid hitting an ally.

From page 140 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Shooting or Throwing into a Melee: If you shoot or throw a ranged weapon at a target engaged in melee with a friendly character, you take a -4 penalty on your attack roll because you have to aim carefully to avoid hitting your friend. Two characters are engaged in melee if they are enemies of each other and either threatens the other. (An unconscious or otherwise immobilized character is not considered engaged unless he is actually being attacked.)

If your target (or the part of your target you're aiming at, if it's a big target) is at least 10 feet away from the nearest friendly character, you can avoid the -4 penalty, even if the creature you're aiming at is engaged in melee with a friendly character.

Precise Shot: If you have the Precise Shot feat (page 98), you don't take this penalty.

As noted on page 140 of the *Player's Handbook*, creatures are in melee when they're enemies and either creature threatens the other. An unconscious or immobilized creature isn't considered to be in melee unless it's actually being attacked.

If your target is at least 10 feet from your allies (as it might be if it has more than 5 feet of melee reach), you don't take the penalty. If your target occupies more than one space, you can avoid the penalty by aiming your ranged attack at a part of your target that is at least 10 feet from your nearest ally -- it's easier to find a safe shot when shooting into a melee than to shoot around cover.

If you must shoot through an ally's (or enemy's) space to hit your target, your target gains cover from the intervening creature (+4 bonus to Armor Class). The target's Armor Class improvement applies in addition to the penalty you take for shooting into a melee.

The Precise Shot feat allows you to fire into melee without penalty.

Magical Effects as Ranged Attacks

Rules and feats that apply to ranged attacks can apply to things other than projectile or thrown weapons, as noted here.

Spells: Any **spell** that requires you to make a ranged attack roll to aim the spell is subject to all the rules that

govern ranged attacks, including most feats that improve ranged attacks.

All spells that produce rays fall into this category. Other spells that have effect entries and produce effects that you throw or otherwise propel away from you also count as ranged attacks, provided that you actually use the effect at range. (See [Rules of the Game: Reading Spell Descriptions](#)) and page 175 in *the Player's Handbook* for a discussion of effect spells.) Other spells might also work as ranged attacks; check the spell's description to be sure.

From page 175 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Effect: Some spells, such as *summon monster* spells, create or summon things rather than affecting things that are already present. You must designate the location where these things are to appear, either by seeing it or defining it (for example, "The *insect plague* will appear 20 feet into the area of darkness that the nagas are hiding in"). Range determines how far away an effect can appear, but if the effect is mobile (a summoned monster, for instance), it can move regardless of the spell's range.

Ray: Some effects are rays (for example, *ray of enfeeblement*). You aim a ray as if using a ranged weapon, though typically you make a ranged touch attack rather than a normal ranged attack. As with a ranged weapon, you can fire into the dark or at an invisible creature and hope you hit something. You don't have to see the creature you're trying to hit, as you do with a targeted spell. Intervening creatures and obstacles, however, can block your line of sight or provide cover for the creature you're aiming at.

If a ray spell has a duration, it's the duration of the effect that the ray causes, not the length of time the ray itself persists. If a ray spell deals damage, you can score a critical hit just as if it were a weapon. A ray spell threatens a critical hit on a natural roll of 20 and deals double damage on a successful critical hit.

Spread: Some effects, notably clouds and fogs, spread out from a point of origin, which must be a grid intersection. The effect can extend around corners and into areas that you can't see. Figure distance by actual distance traveled, taking into account turns the spell effect takes. When determining distance for spread effects, count around walls, not through them. As with movement, do not trace diagonals across corners. You must designate the point of origin for such an effect, but you need not have line of effect (see below) to all portions of the effect. Example: *obscuring mist*.

Spells with area entries never function as ranged attacks, nor do most spells that have target entries (unless you must make a ranged attack to hit the target).

Sometimes a spell works as a ranged attack, and sometimes it doesn't, depending on how you use the spell. For example, the *produce flame* spell is an effect spell that you can use for either melee or ranged combat. *Produce flame* counts as a ranged attack only when you're hurling flames.

Other Magical Effects: Any magical effect that you aim at a single target and that requires you to make a [ranged attack roll](#) to hit your target also counts as a ranged attack. For example, the warlock's *eldritch blast* power from [Complete Arcane](#) functions as a ranged attack. If you use a blast shape invocation to change your *eldritch blast* so that it covers an area (such as *eldritch cone*), it no longer functions as a ranged attack -- the modification makes the blast work more like an area spell.

In Conclusion

That wraps up our look at ranged attacks. Hopefully we've tackled a few questions that you had, but if you have

further questions, stop by our website and feel free to ask it in one of our venues online.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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